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Words of Majesty: A Brief History of Royal Correspondence between England and Asia, 1600–1858

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Abstract

Diplomatic historians have downplayed the English Crown's role in Asian diplomacy and over-emphasized the actions of merchants and military officers on the spot, but royal letters and associated materials suggest a different interpretation. The sending of such letters and the complexities of their creation and interpretation shows that English diplomacy in Asia was a collaboration between English Monarchs and the East India Company, and the mode of delivery of royal letters indicates that they played a crucial role in negotiations conducted by men on the spot.

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Introduction

Historians recognize that English diplomacy with Asia increased from the seventeenth century onwards, yet conclude it was sporadic, generally being handled by mercantile or military officials on the spot.[1] Although not inaccurate, such an interpretation erroneously downplays the English Crown's contributions to Asian diplomacy. In the British Library, the National Archives and numerous other institutions in the United Kingdom there survive hundreds of letters exchanged between English and Asian rulers dating from the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. If the Crown's role was genuinely minimal, why was the creation and exchange of such a large body of correspondence felt to be necessary? Adopting a holistic approach to such correspondence in conjunction with related documentary and literary material reveals an alternative interpretation of the Crown's role in Asian diplomacy. Understanding why such letters were required, along with an appreciation of the complex processes surrounding their creation and delivery, reveals that the Crown consistently adopted a collaborative approach to Asian diplomacy working alongside the East India Company.

The East India Company was established in 1600 to facilitate trade between England and Asia, yet by the mid-eighteenth century it had also become a territorial power on the Indian subcontinent. Possessing a monopoly on English trade in the lands between the Cape of Good Hope and the Strait of Magellan into the nineteenth century, the Company initiated diplomatic contacts with rulers throughout its existence. English monarchs keen to encourage its highly lucrative trade supported such ventures as best they could. Initially there were numerous reasons why both parties felt it was necessary to despatch such a formal document on what was essentially a commercial venture. The Company's earliest voyages were as much voyages of exploration as for trade. The only difference was they were travelling to places which they believed other Europeans had already frequented. Published narratives detailing the exploits of European travellers to distant lands were translated into English and found a ready audience in early modern England. Of little practical value for the purposes of trade, their descriptions of the fabulous wealth and kingdoms of the Orient did nevertheless capture the popular imagination.[2]

In lobbying Elizabeth I to establish an East India company, its founding members submitted a report based upon such works to her ministers. Everybody involved was aware that the success of any trade in the East Indies would depend upon the tolerance of the rulers within such kingdoms and empires.[3] Culturally the mercantile classes in the seventeenth century were held in disdain by English as well as European elites, and the experiences of those involved in the Levant or Morocco trades demonstrated that they were held in much the same regard within the Islamic world. Since many of the first directors of the East India Company were leading members of the Levant and Russia companies, they understood the

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1 Black (2000: 11–15).

2 Lawson (1993: 3–4).

3 Bruce (1810: 115–21).

potential hindrances such disdain, coupled with European intrigue, might throw in their way in Asia.[4] However, having raised a subscription of £68,373 for the first voyage,[5] failure was not an option and one of the surest ways to gain acceptance and permission to trade from Asian rulers would be by obtaining credential letters from the Crown.

Taxation derived from trade constituted an invaluable impetus for the English monarchy to write such letters in a period when Crown revenues had fallen and governmental affairs required ever-increasing amounts of financial input.[6] English prestige in diplomacy also demanded the production of royal letters to keep up with their Portuguese, Dutch and French rivals on the international stage. Although European trade formed only a fraction of a much larger intra-Asian trading network,[7] Asian rulers for their part were keen to form alliances or obtain support from English rulers against domestic, neighbouring or European enemies. Finally, as the East India Company became a major territorial, political and military entity in the imperial phase of its existence, royal letters were an important diplomatic means for English and Asian rulers to demonstrate the majesty, power and legitimacy of their rule. Consequently, from the very beginning the creation and exchange of Royal correspondence between England and Asia was a joint venture between the Crown and the Company.

In England, although a royal letter was signed by the monarch, they actually had very little input in drafting and producing them beyond applying their sign manual or signature, a small but essential contribution. Initially it was the East India Company who wished to acquire royal letters for their voyages. Each time they wanted one, it was necessary for the organization's chairman and deputy chairman to petition the Secretary of State, the royal official whose varied responsibilities included managing all of the monarch's correspondence. This is how the Company acquired its letter from Elizabeth I; also within the Company's first letter book there is a petition dated 23 February 1607 addressed to the then Secretary of State Lord Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, enclosing draft letters to various Asian rulers for the approval and signature of James I (*Image 1*).[8] Evidence demonstrating the Company's role in providing advice on a letter's content to the Secretary of State continues well into the second half of the eighteenth century. On 22 November 1764 the Company's chairman wrote to the Secretary of State Lord Stanhope, providing hints to forming an answer to a letter addressed to George III from the Nawab of Arcot.[9]

Usually the Company's applications for royal letters were granted; however, there are exceptions. If a letter could destabilise diplomatic relations with another European power, breached a treaty or otherwise conflicted with the British government's interests, then the Company's application was flatly refused. Such an occasion occurred on 8 February 1771, when the chairman petitioned the Secretary of State Lord Rochford for a letter from George III to the Sultan of Sulu. It was hoped that the royal missal would help the Company's attempts to establish a

4 Grassby (1995); Brenner (1972).
5 Farrington (2002: 19).
6 Braddick (1996).
7 Chaudhuri (1978: 191–213); Prakash (1998: 8–22).
8 British Library, IOR/B/2, ff. 42–3v.
9 British Library, IOR/H/97: 333–8.

trading settlement at Balambangan in Borneo. However, Lord Rochford refused the request the following month, citing a lack of information on the situation in Borneo, alongside the necessity of maintaining a number of treaty engagements with Spain, which had interests in the region.[10]

The year 1784 brought about significant institutional changes in the production of royal correspondence addressed to Asian rulers. During the second half of the eighteenth century a number of scandals and financial crises arose from the Company's mismanagement of its territorial, military and commercial affairs. This gave rise to a general consensus amongst Parliamentarians and ruling elite that the governance of the Company's dominions was unsatisfactory and required reform.[11]

The new ministry headed by William Pitt the Younger decided to address these issues by establishing a government department located at the heart of Whitehall to superintend the civil, military and revenue affairs of the Company's territorial possessions in Asia. Popularly called the Board of Control or India Board, it was provided with relevant copies of the Company's records to formulate policy. The India Board was headed by a president, and the six commissioners had to include one of the Secretaries of State, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and four Privy Councillors whose role was to engage with the Company's affairs throughout Asia and co-ordinate policies to match those of the government.[12]

As a government department, the India Board soon took over the production of royal letters to rulers in regions under the Company's territorial or commercial remit, a point evidenced by the countersignature of the Board's president on a number of royal letters during the nineteenth century.[13] The India Board's support staff of clerks and other officials also acquired extensive knowledge and expertise on affairs throughout Asia, resulting in a decline of the Company's input into a royal letter's content from the late eighteenth century onwards. For example, notes annotated upon a draft letter from King George III to the Chinese Emperor Jiajing dated 22 May 1804 reveal it was composed by the Board's secretary, Benjamin Hobhouse, and presented to the president of the Board, as well as the Company's chairman and deputy chairman, for approval.[14]

Once the contents of a letter had been agreed upon and a final draft completed, a decorated version was composed for presentation to the Asian ruler. Even at this stage the English Crown worked with the Company to make the letters visually striking and majestic in an attempt to bolster non-verbal means of communication. Presentation copies of the royal letters were written on vellum and lavishly decorated at the Company's expense by heralds, limners or scriveners before being signed by the monarch. A number of these artisans were leading intellectuals known for their artistic ability and were often closely connected to the Royal Court. Two individuals known to have produced a large number of presentation royal letters during the reigns of Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I are Sir William Segar and Edward Norgate.[15]

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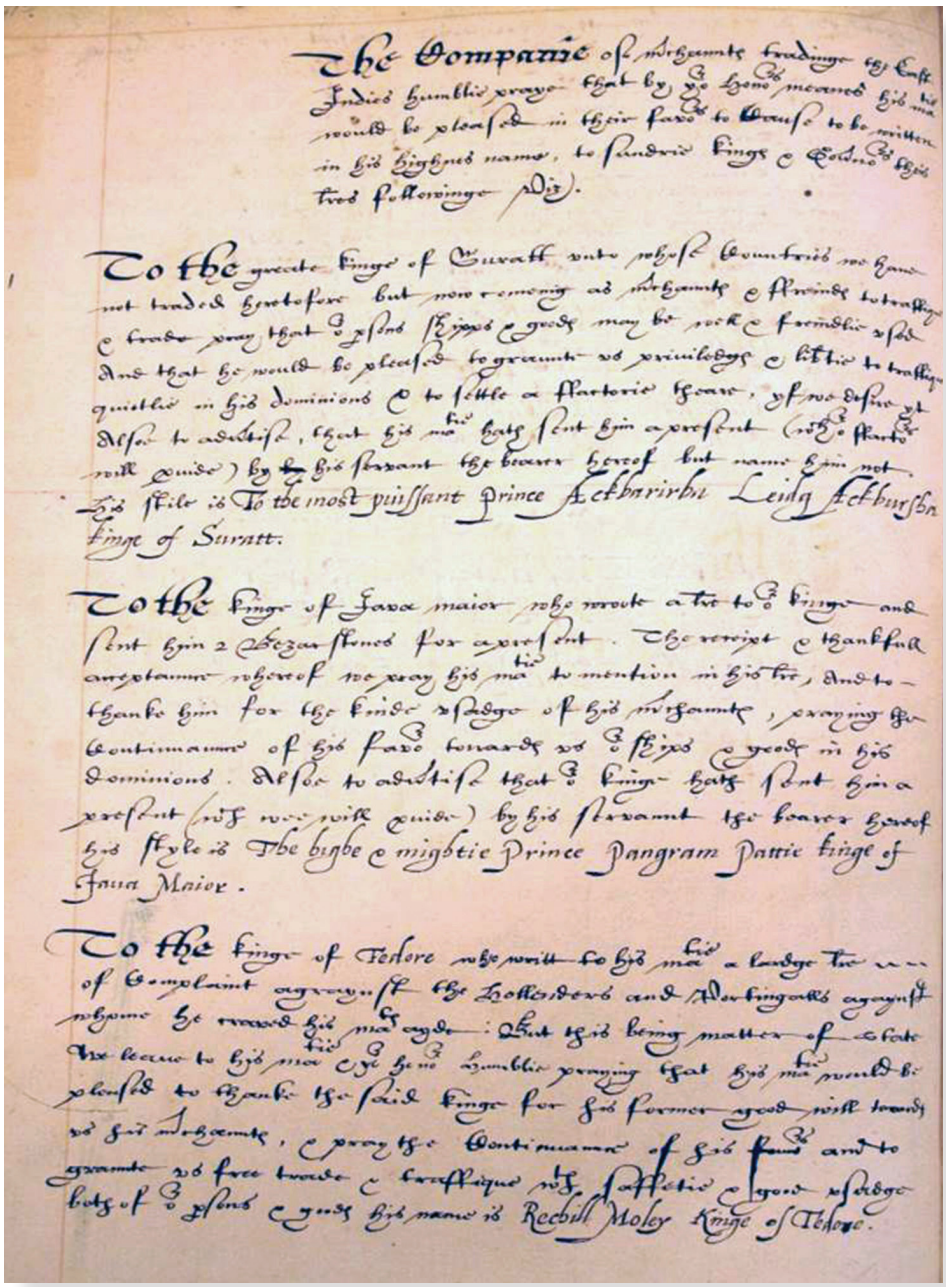
10 British Library, IOR/H/105: 37–40, 49–52.
11 Bowen (1991, 2006); Sutherland (1952); Philips (1940).
12 Foster (1926: 246–76).
13 British Library, IOR/L/PS/14/1; IOPP Mss Eur F213/1.
14 British Library, IOR/G/12/20 ff. 241–6.
15 Jansson (2015: 55–67).



The Companie of Merchants trading to East Indies humblie praye that by ye Lres meanes his ma would be pleased in their fave to cause to be written in his highnes name, to sundrie kings & Rulers his ties followinge viz.

To the greate kinge of Suratt unto whose Countries no Eng: not traded heretofore but now remeyn as Merchants & Friends to trafique & trade pray that ye subs shipps & goods may be safe & freendlie used And that he would be pleased to graunte us priviledge & libtie to trafique quietlie in his dominions & to settle a ffactorie there, if we desire yt Also to advertise, that his ma hath sent him a present (wch ye ffactor will guide) by his servant the bearer hereof but name him not. His stile is To the most puissant Prince Ackbarirbi Leidy Ackbursha kinge of Surratt.

To the kinge of Java maior who wrote a lre to ye kinge and sent him 2 Bezar stones for a present. The receipt & thankfull acceptance whereof we pray his ma to mention in his lre, and to thanke him for the kinde usadge of his Merchants, praying the Continuance of his fave towards us & ships & goods in his dominions. Also to advertise that ye kinge hath sent him a present (wch was with guide) by his servant the bearer hereof his style is The highe & mightie Prince Pangram Pattie kinge of Java Maior.

To the kinge of Tedore who writt to his ma a lardge lre of Complaint agreynst the Hollanders and Zeelanders against whome he craved his ma ayde: But this being matter of estate we leave to his ma & yt his humblie praying that his ma would be pleased to thanke the said kinge for his former good will towards us & our Merchants, & pray the Continuance of his fave and to graunte us free trade & traffique wth his subjects & good usadge both of ye subs & ours his name is Reobill Moley Kinge of Tedore.

Image 1: Extract of a petition from the East India Company to the Secretary of State dated 23 February 1607 showing draft letters to the 'Kings' of Surat, Java and Tidore.
[*Source: British Library, IOR/B/2*]

Sir William Segar was born around 1554 and trained as a scrivener under Thomas Heneage, who introduced him to the College of Arms, working his way up to Norroy King of Arms and eventually Garter in 1607. Although identifying Segar's work has proved problematic, he is known to have produced images of Elizabeth I and other prominent individuals.[16] He also published a number of poems, travel accounts and other works, in addition to having friends amongst the cream of Tudor and Jacobean literati such as historian John Stowe and noted writers George Chapman and Ben Johnson.[17] Segar's official responsibilities in the Court pageants and entertainments, his artistic skill and literary bent made him an ideal candidate for decorating and producing presentation copies of royal letters. Therefore it comes as no surprise to learn from the East India Company's minute books that he was responsible for decorating Elizabeth I's royal letter for the Company's maiden voyage in 1600, as well as a number of the early royal letters despatched in the name of James I.[18]

Despite gaps in the East India Company's archives, it is known that a number of anonymous scriveners were also employed to produce royal letters required by the Company's commercial expansion during the early seventeenth century. Initially the practice of subcontracting out the production of a royal letter in such an open manner was acceptable since they were merely for credential purposes requesting trading privileges. However, as the trade became more permanent with the establishment of trading settlements (known as factories) in Asia, this became increasingly untenable. Intense rivalry with Dutch and other European traders in Asia often degenerated into violence, compelling the Company's directorate to appeal to James I and Charles I for diplomatic assistance in Europe to defend the Company's interests. This state of affairs also necessitated the monarch's intercession with various rulers throughout Asia, thereby resulting in an increased output of royal letters containing sensitive political and diplomatic content. For security and confidentiality, the responsibility for decorating royal letters became increasingly restricted to appointed individuals such as the courtier Edward Norgate.[19]

Norgate was born and grew up within an academic household; his father Robert was a theologian and Vice-Chancellor at Cambridge University. Following his father's death in 1587, his mother Elizabeth married another academic, Nicholas Felton, and by 1594 the family had moved to London. Felton, finding his stepson inclined to limning and heraldry, encouraged his interests, enabling Norgate to eventually become an artist of some repute. His biographer, Thomas Fuller, praised Norgate as the most accomplished illuminator and limner of the age, whilst his aesthetic expertise resulted in his employment by the Earl of Arundel and Charles I to travel through Europe to identify and purchase paintings. Norgate also wrote the *Miniatura*, which has been described by academics as a fundamental treatise on miniature painting.[20] In addition to his artistic reputation, Norgate was also a highly regarded and noted musician. His first court appointment in 1611 was as

16 Cooper (2013).
17 Adolph (2004).
18 Stevens (1886:139).
19 Calendar of state papers: domestic series hereafter (CSPD): 1625–1626: 209.
20 Norgate (1997).

the tuner and, later, keeper of the King's virginals, organs and other instruments, a task which he performed rather than delegated. He was also an excellent organist and lutenist, being recorded amongst the King's musicians in 1626 and 1641. Norgate was made Windsor Herald in 1633 in addition to filling a number of mid-level administrative posts including Clerk of the Signet. Like Sir William Segar, Norgate's artistic skill, his official posts and interests made him an excellent candidate to prepare presentation copies of royal letters. As early as April 1613 he was paid by the Treasurer of the Chamber for writing and illuminating in gold and colours certain letters from James I to the rulers of Persia and India.[21] On his accession to the throne, Charles I granted Norgate and his deputies the sole right of decorating royal letters in 1625, reconfirming the privilege again in 1631. During his career, he decorated presentation royal letters addressed to the rulers of Turkey, Persia, Russia and India, in addition to the 'Kings of Bantam, Macassar, Barbary, Siam, Achien [Acheen], Fez, Sus and other far distant kings'.[22]

Norgate's death in 1650 coincided with a period of profound but short-term change for the British government. Charles I was executed and a Council of State established, as well as a dictatorship under Oliver Cromwell and his son Richard. The individuals who decorated letters on behalf of the government to Asian rulers during the inter-regnum are unknown. Nevertheless, there are indications of continuity of practice. As Lord Protectors both Oliver and then Richard Cromwell were kings in all but name, being given the title of royal highness and, as heads of state, letters were addressed to them from merchants and rulers in Asia.[23] In 1658 the Company even approached Richard Cromwell, asking him to write letters to the emperors of China and Japan, something he agreed to do just prior to being overthrown in a military coup.[24] After the Restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660, the decoration of Royal letters took on a more institutionalised form with the creation of the post of 'Embellisher of letters to Eastern Princes'. Under the Secretaries of State, such embellishers were receiving payments of £10 issued by the Treasurer of the Chamber on the Secretary of State's authority.[25]

The first individual in the post was George Tomlyn, who was paid for embellishing two letters to the Tsar of Russia in 1662.[26] Little is known about Tomlyn's personal life, but he held two patents dated between 1660 and 1662 for a press which produced text and flourishing on vellum and parchment.[27] During his career as the Embellisher of letters to eastern princes, Tomlyn is known to have decorated presentation letters addressed to the rulers of Russia, Turkey, Morocco and elsewhere.[28] Sadly, despite the faithful discharge of these duties between 1662 and 1670, Tomlyn suffered real financial hardship as a result of his work since payment of his salary was withheld for a number of years. Despite submitting numerous petitions to the Secretary of State for payment of arrears, by 1670 he was owed £396 and did not have enough money or credit to buy materials to

21 Ibid.; Auerbach (1954: 179); Howarth (2008).
22 (CSPD): 1629–1631: 532.
23 British Library, OIOC Reg. 16BXXI, f. 27.
24 Sainsbury (1916: 295–7).
25 Sainty (1973: 43).
26 (CSPD): 1661–1662: 452 and 518.
27 (CSPD): 1663–1664: 461. Calendar of Patent Rolls, 15 Car. II. Pt 11 No. 3.
28 (CSPD): 1665–1666: 109.

produce more letters.[29] As Tomlyn's financial crisis and bankruptcy beckoned, the post of Embellisher was next granted to Gideon Royer, who by 1669 was paid £10 for embellishing a letter to the Tsar of Russia.[30] Royer was a renowned embellisher, calligrapher and mathematician, writing and co-authoring a number of publications upon these subjects between 1681 and 1721.[31] Holding the post until 1704, Royer's long tenure saw him embellishing presentation royal letters addressed to the rulers of Russia, Turkey, Persia and Morocco.[32]

From 1707 to 1782 the Embellisher of letters was paid a regular annual salary of £60 and from 1714 was gazetted as an official of the Royal Household in directories such as the *Magnae Britanniae Notitia* and the *Court and City Kalendar*. When the business of the Secretaries of State was reorganized into the Foreign and Home Offices in 1782, it was the Foreign Office which took responsibility for the Crown's foreign correspondence and the post of Embellisher went into gradual decline. By 1797 the salary was reduced to £25 17s per annum and by 1800 the post seems to have been abolished.[33] Nevertheless, the India Board continued the practice of decorating letters addressed to Asian rulers into the nineteenth century, as is attested by payments listed in the contingent expenses of their account books to individual artisans for decorating letters addressed to the emperors of China.[34]

Assessing the visual uniformity of such letters and any stylistic changes over time is far from straightforward. Although there are hundreds of undecorated drafts of royal letters existing in archival institutions within the United Kingdom, decorated presentation copies are much rarer. This is attributable to the fact that they were sent to Asia and are lost or remain unidentified overseas. However, there are a number of notable exceptions, and these—coupled with other forms of documentary evidence—provide a general picture of how visually striking such letters were. The British Library possesses one of the earliest presentation letters sent by an English ruler to Asia. It is a circular letter from King James I with a blank space left for the name of the relevant ruler to be filled in by the commander of the voyage (*Image 2*). Dated 30 March 1609, the letter is written on vellum, with an illuminated floral border, as well as an enlarged illuminated 'J' with the first line 'JAMES, BY, THE GRACE', decorated with gold leaf and black ink.[35] The library also holds a slightly later presentation copy sent by James I to Shah Abbas of Persia (*Image 3*). Dated 14 February 1622, it is again written on vellum, the outer edge of which has a floral design in gold with dots and geometric patterns in blue and gold. The text begins with an enlarged red, blue and gold illuminated 'J' at the beginning of the opening line 'James by the'. Stylistically similar to the earlier letter, the writing is in brown ink with the capital letters all illuminated with gold leaf and the King's sign manual present on the bottom right of the letter.[36]

The various royal letters referred to within the various volumes of the *Calendar of State Papers Domestic Series* reveal that by the reign of Charles II their design has

[29] (CSPD) Green Series Charles II Addenda: 630.
[30] (CSPD): 1668–1669: 163.
[31] Royer (1681, 1721).
[32] (CSPD): 1699–1700: 300; 1700–1702: 380; 1702–1703: 505.
[33] Sainty (1973: 43).
[34] British Library, IOR/L/AG/43/1/1–8.
[35] British Library, Add. Ch. 56456.
[36] British Library, IOR/A/1/7B.

AMES, BY, THE, GRACE
of Almighty GOD, Kinge of great Britaine, Fraunce and Ireland,
Defendor of the Christian Faith, &c.
Most High and Mighty Kinge

Image 2: Presentation copy of a circular letter from King James I to rulers in the East Indies dated 30 March 1609. [*Source: British Library, Add.Ch.56456*]

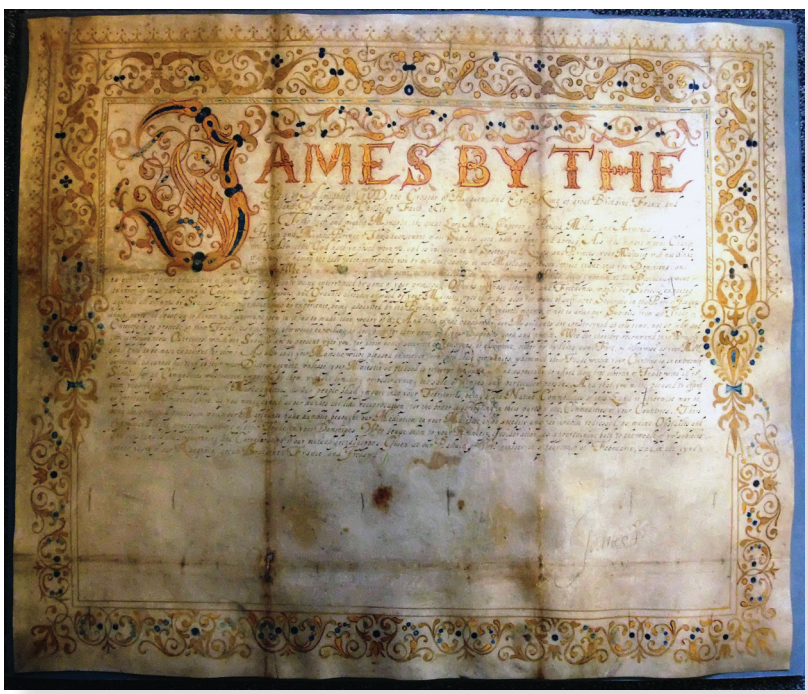


Image 3: Presentation copy of a letter from King James I to the Shah Abbas of Persia dated 14 February 1622. [*Source: British Library, IOR/A/1/7B*]

evolved somewhat. The letters decorated by George Tomlyn are usually described as containing the King's picture, badges and coats of arms in gold and colour.[37] However, those produced by his successor, Gideon Royer, seem to have been without the King's picture since his letters are generally described as lavishly adorned with only arms, ornaments and badges.[38] Royer's presentation letters for Charles II were probably visually identical to those he produced for James II, an example of which is yet again held at the British Library (*Image 4*).[39] Addressed to the Turkish Grand Vizier and dated 30 September 1685, this presentation letter possesses some of the stylistic elements used in the presentation letters for James I. It has a border with floral designs and geometric patterns in gold and black, as well as an enlarged illuminated 'J' and opening line 'James the Second By the' in gold and ink. Like the letter of James I to the Shah of Persia, the capitals in the main body of James II's text are illuminated in gold and red. Unlike the earlier letters, this one contains a number of heraldic devices and armorial bearings for England, France, Ireland, Scotland and Wales around the border matching the descriptions in the *Calendar of State Papers* for letters from Charles II referred to earlier.

Minor stylistic variations aside, this basic design appears to have been long-lasting. Although annotations on draft letters being sent out from George III to Chinese Emperor Qianlong in 1792 describe the presentation copy as merely being decorated with gold borders,[40] there is reason to believe otherwise. The final presentation letter held at the British Library is from His Royal Highness the Prince Regent George addressed to the Chinese Emperor Jiajing, dated 19 January 1816 (*Image 5*).[41] Written on vellum, the letter contains a lavishly illuminated floral border in black, pink, orange, grey, yellow, gold and blue, headed with the royal coat of arms and supporters as well as the Union flag. In addition to this, each of the four corners contains a separate image depicting one of the four royal orders. Unlike the other original presentation copies housed at the library, the text of this letter has not been illuminated. Finally, in tandem with the production of such letters in Britain, there is also some evidence of English officials using Indian decorated paper as a substitute for illuminated letters during embassies. The British Library's collection of Persian manuscripts associated with the Embassy of Sir William Norris to the Court of the Indian Emperor Aurangzeb from 1699 to 1701 includes a copy of a letter delivered by Norris from William III to the Emperor on Indian decorated paper containing floral motifs and sprinkled silver.[42]

In Southeast Asia there is documentary evidence that locally produced illuminated royal letters tended to be produced by Malay and Javanese scribes, the nobility, and even women.[43] However, generally the craftsmen producing royal letters for Asian rulers tend to be less documented than those in England. Despite this state of affairs, their presentation royal letters are more frequently encountered within the collections of the British Library, the Bodleian and the National

37 (CSPD) 1663–1664: 383.
38 (CSPD) 1676–1677: 340.
39 British Library, Stowe Manuscript 221.
40 British Library, IOR/G/12/93: 421.
41 British Library, IOPP Mss Eur F140/43(b).
42 British Library, IOR/E/3/60 OC 7396a.
43 Gallop (1994: 43).

Image 4: Presentation copy of a letter from King James II to the Grand Vizier of Turkey dated 30 September 1685. [*Source: British Library, Stowe 221*]

Image 5: Presentation copy of a letter from the Prince Regent to the Chinese Emperor Jiajing dated 19 January 1816. [*Source: British Library, IOPP Mss Eur F140/43(b)*]

Archives. These illuminated manuscripts, along with descriptive annotations on translated versions, demonstrate that royal letters from Asian rulers came in a wider variety of physical formats. Without a doubt the most impressive and ostentatious royal letter ever despatched to an English monarch has to be the one addressed to King George II from the Burmese King Alaungphaya in 1756, being engraved upon a sheet of solid gold, with an intricate gold seal and studded with twenty-four red rubies.[44]

Royal letters despatched by Asian rulers were generally written on good quality paper initially produced locally or imported from other parts of Asia. Letters from the Qajar Dynasty in Iran were initially written on local paper, but soon changed to Russian and French laid paper before the introduction of machine-made paper in the nineteenth century. Likewise in India, the various Royal Courts tended to use locally produced paper for their royal letters. The Mughal Court in Delhi had its own paper workshops, whilst the Deccan and Carnatic were famous for their thin, highly burnished paper. Paper manufactured and illuminated within India was also widely exported throughout Southeast Asia in addition to paper from China. However, from the eighteenth century onwards good quality linen rag and, later, machine-made paper manufactured in Europe and exported to South and Southeast Asia were increasingly adopted for use in the production of royal letters.[45]

Visually striking, it doesn't take a trained eye to appreciate the aesthetic similarities between the royal letters from Sultan Iskandar Muda of Aceh to James I in 1615 with those sent by Constantine Phaulkon on behalf of King Narai of Siam to the Pope in 1688; nor with those from the Nawabs of Arcot (*Image 6*), Bengal (*Image 7*) and the Sidi of Surat (*Image 8*) addressed to King George III between 1760 and 1765.[46] This can be partially explained by the export of decorated Indian paper to Southeast Asia, yet this explanation fails to explain the similarities in royal letters illuminated at a ruler's court. Letter-writing traditions underpinning the production of royal letters by Persian, Indian and Malay rulers all share a similar Islamic heritage; thus, despite regional varieties in design and technique, their structural formats are similar, providing yet more proof of the long-standing cultural diffusion already observed in the architecture, religion, art, literature and language.[47]

Generally the paper used for such royal letters is taller than wider, resulting in a somewhat rectangular shape, although the paper used in royal letters from the Deccan region of south India have the bottom right-hand corner of the paper deliberately cut off. Also, the formal structure of the letters themselves is similar,

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[44] British Library, IOR/H/95: 27–8, see also http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-8/the-golden-letter-of-the-burmese-king-alaungphaya-to-king-george-ii-of-great-britain/ Accessed 23 April 2017.

[45] Gallop (1994: 41).

[46] British Library, IOR/H/190: 551; IOR/H/194: 1, 9, 13, IOR/H/98: 71; IOR/H/97: 356; National Archives, CO 77/14: 111; Bodleian Library, MSS Laud Or. Rolls b.1 Also a letter from Constantine Phaulkon in Ayutthaya on behalf of King Narai to the Pope in 1688 has remarkable parallels with CO 77/14: 111 and IOR/E/3/60 OC 7396a. See Smithies and Bressan (2001: 100).

[47] Gallop (1991, 1994: 41).

Image 6: Presentation copy of a letter from the Nawab of Arcot to King George III dated 15 April 1764. [*Source: British Library, IOR/H/97/356*]

Image 7: Presentation copy of a letter from the Nawab of Bengal to King George III dated 1765. [*Source: British Library, IOR/H/98/71*]

Image 8: Presentation copy of a letter from the Sidi of Surat to King George III dated 1760. [*Source: British Library, IOR/H/194/9*]

Image 9: Presentation copy of a letter from the Rajah of Mindanao to King George III dated 15 June 1775.
[*Source: British Library, IOR/H/128: 496–7*]

comprising a titular heading, or decorative feature surrounding a large text block which contains the letter's content. In many instances the paper itself is illuminated and gilded in complex floral and geometric designs strongly influenced by Muslim and Indian art.[48] However, not all royal letters addressed to English rulers despatched from Southeast Asia were decorated since the library has a presentation royal letter addressed to George III in 1775 from the Rajah of Mindanao in the southern Philippines (*Image 9*). This manuscript was written on undecorated European linen rag paper, adorned with an Islamic seal.[49] Outside the Islamic tradition, letters from the emperors of China tended to also be less decorative, being written on large undecorated yellow silk in plain ink and stamped with a red Imperial seal.[50]

In England, once the presentation copy of a letter was completed, it was then submitted to the monarch by a Secretary of State for their sign manual or signature. The letters were then folded closed and sealed to provide privacy and additional proof of the letter's authenticity. If a monarch had newly ascended the throne and a seal was unavailable it would instead be illuminated onto the letter. On 10 August 1702 Gideon Royer was paid £10: 'for fairly writing, flourishing and embellishing, as also for guilding in grotesco all our arms, ornaments and badges, and for writing, gilding and embellishing the superscription with a gilded seal and label' on a letter from Queen Anne to the Tsar of Russia.[51] Evidence of decorating the superscription as well as folding and sealing letters is also present on those for Elizabeth I, James I (*Image 10*), James II and the Prince Regent (Image 11). Once folded up and sealed, the letters were then stored in a textile pouch or box purchased especially for this purpose, as was the case with the circular letter of Elizabeth I sent out on the first voyage.[52] Furthermore, it is even recorded that the letter from Charles II to the Sultan of Banten was placed in a purse of cloth of gold and presented to the Indonesian Ambassador at his Court.[53]

Asian rulers also went to considerable trouble in sealing and packaging their letters prior to despatch. Initially, letters were precisely folded into a paper envelope upon which the ruler's seal was pressed before being placed in a textile pouch. This was then placed within a gauze pouch to protect the textile from wear. Unfortunately, the decisions behind a ruler's choice of textiles for the pouches remains unclear. Generally, they were colourful high-quality textiles and silks from South or Southeast Asia.[54] Numerous examples of such pouches and envelopes can be found in the Raffles and Bowring Collections (*Images 12-13*) at the British Library. In some cases the colour has a clear significance, for example yellow silk pouches were popular with Malay and Siamese rulers as the colour denoted royalty (*Image 14*). In the Bowring Collection there is even an example of a yellow silk envelope constructed to a European design used by Siamese king Rama IV (*Image 15*).[55] In some instances, such envelopes may also have a paper label attached

48 Ibid.
49 British Library, IOR/H/144: 249–51; IOR/H/166: 309–12.
50 British Library, IOR/G/12/93: 421.
51 (CSPD): 1702–1703: 505.
52 *Calendar of State Papers Colonial: East Indies: 1513–1616*: 121 entry 286.
53 Gallop (1994: 103).
54 Ibid.: 93–103.
55 British Library, IOPP Mss Eur G38.

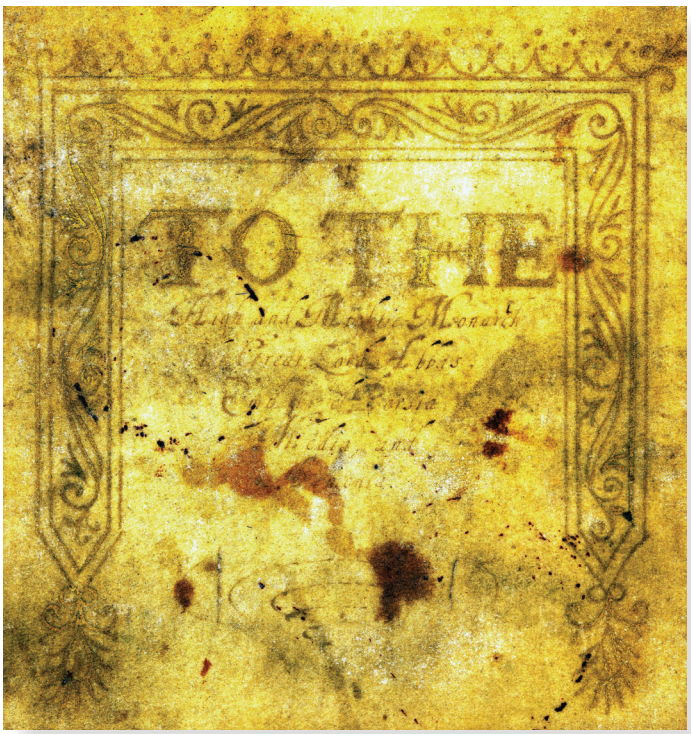

Image 10: Decorated superscription on the reverse of the letter from King James I to the Shah Abbas of Persia dated 14 February 1622. [*Source: British Library, IOR/A/1/7B*]

Image 11: Decorated superscription on the reverse of the letter from the Prince Regent to the Chinese Emperor Jiajing dated 19 January 1816. [*Source: British Library, IOPP Mss Eur F140/43(b)*]

Image 12: Embroidered silk envelope used for a South Asian Royal letter addressed to Sir John Bowring, *c.*1850. [*Source: British Library, IOPP Mss Eur G38*]

Image 13: Embroidered silk envelope used for a South Asian Royal letter addressed to Sir John Bowring, *c.*1850. [*Source: British Library, IOPP Mss Eur G38*]

ถึงท่านเซอยอนโบาริง พระยาสยามานุกูลกิจสยามมิตรมหายศ
ซึ่งรับตำแหน่งเป็นทูตสยาม ณเมืองต่าง ๆ ในยุโรป ๆ
To His Excellency Sir John Bowring L.L.D. F.R.S. &c.
now entitled in Siamese dignified title of Phaya
Siamanukul Kich Siamamitre Mahayose the
Minister Plenipotentiary in charge of Siamese
affair in Europe &c.

Image 14: Thai silk envelope used for a letter from King Rama IV of Siam to Sir John Bowring, *c.*1850. [*Source: British Library, IOPP Mss Eur G38*]

Image 15: Thai silk envelope constructed in the European style used for a letter from King Rama IV of Siam to Sir John Bowring, *c.*1850. [*Source: British Library, IOPP Mss Eur G38*]

providing the name of the recipient. Finally, some envelopes might not have been made of textiles since the golden letter from King Alaungphaya of Burma to King George II was packaged in an ivory cask.[56]

Another point worthy of consideration is how royal letters in an array of languages were translated, interpreted and understood. Although the Company's role in a letter's creation declined from the late eighteenth century onwards, its role in diffusing the linguistic and cultural knowledge necessary to interpret them remained constant until 1858. The biggest problem facing English and Asian rulers wishing to exchange letters was always linguistic. Being closely identified with national identity, many rulers felt it necessary to write in particular languages to retain royal dignity. English and Asian royalty were no exception to this rule and, consequently, wrote in particular languages.[57]

Wherever possible, an intermediate language mutually comprehensible to both the sender and recipient was used for purposes of interpretation. As the Portuguese had established a commercial empire throughout Asia since the sixteenth century and were long-term political allies of England, both English and Asian rulers had access to individuals proficient in Portuguese.[58] Consequently, the Company's minute books and early letter books with copies of the Royal letters sent by Elizabeth I in 1600 and James I in 1607 contain annotations that Portuguese translations accompanied the English versions.[59]

The growing importance of the East India Company's China trade to state revenues in taxation, a desire to open up new markets for British commodities, and imperial rivalry against France compelled the British Government to try to establish diplomatic relations with the Chinese emperor.[60] Between 1787 and 1816 three Embassies were despatched to China, numerous letters were exchanged between George III and the Prince of Wales with emperors Qianglong and Jiajing.[61] Once again the strategy of using an intermediate language was adopted. During all three Embassies Latin was the intermediate language used, being mutually comprehensible to European officials and Jesuit missionaries who had a long established presence at the Emperor's Court in Beijing.

All of the English letters were accompanied with a Latin translation which could be translated into Chinese by the Jesuits. Qianlong and Jiajing's letters to King George III were in Chinese accompanied with Manchu and Latin translations. In George Leonard Staunton's account of Macartney's Embassy to China he records that Johann Hüttner translated George III's letter for the Emperor into Latin. This was done 'to afford the Missionaries in his service at Pekin an opportunity of correcting any error which might have crept into the Chinese translation, the

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56 Victoria Ward: Burmese letter to King George II deciphered after more than 250 years in *The Telegraph*, 14 January 2011. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/burmamyanmar/8259851/Burmese-letter-to-King-George-II-deciphered-after-more-than-250-years.html. Accessed 1 February 2011.

57 Simpson (2007); Bulliet (2008: 639).

58 Boxer (1969, 1985).

59 Sainsbury (1862: 148 entry 362).

60 Bowen (2006: 222–34: Mui and Mui (1984); Van Dyke (2005).

61 British Library, IOR/G/12/18, ff. 71–2; IOR/G/12/20 ff. 213–15v, ff. 393–400; IOR/G/12/91, ff. 171–4v; IOR/G/12/92: 243–57; IOR/G/12/93, ff. 327–44v, and same volume between folios 424–5.

style of writing in that language for the Court being familiar only to those who are employed about the Palace'.[62] The Latin version of Jiajing's letter to George III dated December 1805 was translated into English upon its arrival in London by John Bruce at the request of the India Board. Once again Bruce was approached by the India Board in April 1810 to translate George III's letter to Jiajing into Latin.[63]

The Company's own employees stationed overseas were also a vital linguistic resource for both English and Asian rulers in the translation and interpretation of royal letters. Many of the writers, factors and other officials employed by the Company were literate, having received some training in book-keeping and letter-writing. Intellectual and commercial incentives encouraged many of the Company's servants to learn the languages of the regions they were living and trading in.[64] A notable example is Constantine Phaulkon who fled as a child from Cephalonia to London and sought employment in the Company's service. Trading at Madras and Siam, he became fluent in Thai, impressing King Narai enough to ensure his appointment as the Minister in charge of foreign trade in Siam from the 1670s and 1680s. It was in this official capacity that he despatched royal letters on behalf of King Narai to to the Pope, Louis XIV and James II.[65]

Another individual, Captain Thomas Forrest, hoped to establish a commercial settlement at Mindanao in the southern Philippines. He brought back some letters from the Rajah of Mindanao to King George III which were translated by Company servants proficient in the Jawi script.[66] William Marsden was stationed in the Company's settlement at Fort Marlborough in Sumatra between 1770 and 1779 and became so proficient in Malay that he went on to provide translations of royal letters received from the rulers of the Molucca Islands, Kedah, Terengganu, and Menangkabau in Indonesia for the Crown and the Company.[67] Finally, George Thomas Staunton accompanied his father to China with the Macartney Embassy. During the outward bound voyage he learned enough Mandarin from two Chinese shipmates to impress Emperor Qianlong during the Ambassador's reception, receiving a silk purse for his endeavours.[68] As a young man he sought and obtained employment at the Company's factory in Canton, where he continued to hone his Mandarin in the early nineteenth century.[69]

The English government was never entirely dependent upon Staunton to translate royal correspondence with China. However, two of his translations survive in the India Office Records; one is an English version of the same letter translated from the Latin by John Bruce in December 1805. The other is a letter from Jiajing to the Prince of Wales dated 7 January 1817, of which a translation based upon a Latin version of the text also survives.[70] Such manuscripts demonstrate that, whilst British Sinology was still in its infancy, the British government preferred to cross-check both the Latin and Chinese translations,

62 Staunton (1797: 246).
63 British Library, IOR/H/456E.
64 Farrington (2002: 36–7).
65 Sitsayamkan (1967); Farrington (2007); Smithies and Bressan (2001): 100.
66 Forrest (1779); British Library, IOR/H/128: 495–8.
67 Cook (2004); Gallop (1991).
68 Staunton (1797: 31–2, 78).
69 Staunton (1856: 13–66).
70 British Library, IOR/G/12/197: 391–402.

making Staunton's versions part of a much larger and more complicated translation process than was previously supposed.

Administrative and judicial responsibilities in India from the second half of the eighteenth century necessitated the eventual creation of a number of educational institutions such as Fort William College in Calcutta; the East India College at Haileybury; and the Addiscombe Military Seminary in the opening years of the nineteenth century. New recruits for the Company's civil or military services were taught at such institutions by leading experts to ensure they were equipped with essential professional and linguistic skills their future careers overseas would require.[71] Many of the teachers and graduates from these institutions were called upon to translate royal letters exchanged between England and Asia. Henry George Keene served in the Madras Army, taking part in the siege of Seringapatam in 1799. By January 1804 he graduated from Fort William College, Calcutta with distinctions in Persian and Arabic and returned to England, where he studied at Cambridge prior to being appointed Professor of Arabic and Persian at the East India College Haileybury between 1824 and 1834.[72] In 1831 he translated letters from the Imam of Muscat addressed to William IV into English at the request of the India Board.[73]

Another notable example is Sir Walter Elliot, who studied at Haileybury in 1818, learning Tamil and Hindustani. In India he also became proficient in Arabic, Marathi, Persian and Telugu, skills which ensured his eventual appointment as Private Secretary to Lord Elphinstone, Governor of Madras, in 1836. In this post he took on many other duties, including translating documents in the Kannada and Persian languages.[74] He also translated a royal letter from the Naib-I-Moolstan to Queen Victoria dated 23 October 1837 into English at the request of the India Board.[75] The presence of such linguistically gifted company personnel to posts such as the Malay Translator at Penang, as residents in Royal Courts, or employed directly by Asian rulers also enabled rulers from Persia, Arcot, Bengal, and Southeast Asia to have linguists on hand to assist with their own translations.

The Company and its senior officials posted overseas also employed some of the best Asian scholars and scribes who were instrumental in the creation and translation of royal letters between English and Asian rulers. Mirza Muhammed Ibrahim began his career as an assistant to Henry George Keene at Haileybury prior to being appointed Professor of Persian in his own right. He was responsible for translating a number of royal letters into English, including one from Prince Zell-e Soltan in Constantinople to Lord Viscount Palmerston dated 2 August 1838.[76] Finally, the famous Malay author and teacher Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (also known as Munshi Abdullah) was employed as a scribe by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles in 1810. Abdullah's autobiography, *Hikayat Abdullah*, describes how Raffles instructed him to prepare numerous letters addressed to various Malay rulers, at

71 Danvers (1894); Farrington (1976).
72 Keene (2004).
73 British Library, IOR/L/PS/14/1: 73–5.
74 Arbuthnot (2004).
75 British Library, IOR/L/PS/14/1: 215–18.
76 Ibid.: 222–39.

one point even being instructed to write and illuminate a letter addressed to the King of Siam.[77]

The complex bureaucracy surrounding the creation and interpretation of royal letters exchanged between England and Asia was therefore an expensive and time-consuming process for both the Crown and the Company in terms of time, materials and expertise. Being more acquainted with the processes of creation and interpretation, asserting that Asian diplomacy was generally conducted by mercantile and military officials on the spot is unsustainable. Once a letter was drafted, a decorated presentation copy created, signed and sealed, it remained for it to be delivered. Understanding the intricacies surrounding the delivery of royal letters to their intended recipients also challenges notions surrounding the importance of the individual on the spot since it becomes clear that the royal letter and the associated gifts, including jewels, weapons, artwork or jewellery, were all an indispensable part of the diplomatic process.

Initially the Company and its officials once again played an important role which can usefully be divided into two parts. The first dealt with the despatch of a letter from the country of origin overseas. During the East India Company's earliest voyages there were no military or diplomatic officials accredited by the Crown in Asia.[78] Consequently, letters were generally given to the commander of the Company's separate trading voyages, he being the most senior in rank upon whom the commercial success of the voyage was dependent. Such individuals often combined the roles of skilled navigator and merchant with those of the diplomat. On taking leave for a voyage they would take charge of the presentation letter from the chairman and deputy chairman of the Company, who had received it in turn from the Secretary of State. For the duration of the voyage the royal letter was then stored safely in their private baggage. When a royal letter from an Asian ruler was being sent to England it was again put under the charge of the commander of the voyage who once more kept it stored safely in his private baggage for the duration of the voyage. Upon the letter's arrival in England it was handed over to the chairman and deputy chairman, who made preparations with the Secretary of State to present it to the monarch.[79] In effect for the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth century, the Company was almost the sole channel by which a royal letter could be delivered; notable exceptions to this rule were if there was an ambassador appointed to specific embassies such as Sir Thomas Roe and William Norris to the Mughal Court.

Once the Company became a territorial power from the mid-eighteenth century onwards this situation began to change since an increasing number of royally appointed naval, military and other diplomatic officials were stationed throughout Asia. Individuals either in the Crown's or Company's employment also gained the confidence of Asian rulers, who would entrust the delivery of their letters through less official channels. The Mughal Emperor and the Nawab of Arcot both attempted to circumvent the delivery of letters to George III via the Company. However, the Company, fearful that such a direct line of communication

77 Sneddon (2003: 71); Gallop (1994: 43, 143).
78 Black (2000: 12–13).
79 British Library, IOR/H/42: 61; IOR/H/134: 73–83.

between rulers could cause problems, tried unsuccessfully to curb such activity.[80] Nevertheless, although the Company continued to play a role in delivering presentation letters between Britain and Asia, its monopoly was supplanted by the presence of accredited agents and plenipotentiaries of the Crown in the East who soon became the main channel of delivering letters to and from rulers via Company and Naval vessels.

More relevant for the purposes of this paper is the final phase of the journey where the letter was presented to a ruler. In both England and Asia, when a letter accompanied an embassy or official delegation its presentation to the recipient was marked with significant etiquette, pomp and ceremony. Generally, the letter stood as proxy for Sovereign in its own right. Raffles' *History of Java* contains translated extracts from the *Niti Praja* outlining clear rules of etiquette for a letter's delivery. The individual delivering the letter had to ensure it was: 'carried on the shoulder, and in his gait and speech must present himself with dignity, approach first, and then retire from the person to whom the letter is directed, speak with him at a distance, and not too familiarly'.[81] Also, once the Sultan of Banten was satisfied that Sir Henry Middleton was Elizabeth I's official representative, her letter was delivered to the Sultan in an impressive ceremonial procession, being carried on the back of an elephant resting upon a special cushion.[82]

In India the Nawab of Arcot is also recorded to have received a number of letters from George III in a public ceremony with salutes and fireworks, wearing his finest ceremonial clothes for the occasion.[83] In China during the Macartney Embassy, Qianlong's letter to George III was carried in front of the departing Embassy by a Mandarin on horseback, an event depicted by the artist William Alexander and detailed in all of the published and contemporary accounts of the visit.[84] In mainland Southeast Asia, Guy Tachard's account of the Embassy led by French Ambassador Alexandre, Chevalier de Chaumont, to King Narai of Siam in 1685 provides very detailed and lengthy descriptions of how important the Siamese felt royal letters were. Tachard faithfully reports that the letter from King Louis XIV to King Narai was given more respect than the Ambassador travelling upriver in great state on board a special barge to the royal court at Ayutthaya (*Image 16*).[85] In return, the letter from King Narai to Louis XIV sent with the Siamese Embassy of 1687 also received due pomp and attention upon its arrival at Versailles. The letter led a formal procession on a grand litter under three royal umbrellas at the head of the entourage. The Ambassador, Kosa Pan, and the rest of the Siamese delegation followed behind it in due reverence, whilst Europeans in the entourage carried their hats as a mark of respect.[86]

The messenger presenting the letter also had to demonstrate appropriate marks of respect without compromising the royal dignity of their own ruler. Many such events passed without incident, but with such complex etiquette and

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80 British Library, IOPP Mss Eur F87/68 ff. 227–8v.
81 Raffles (1978: 1/315–16).
82 Green, John (1745: 263).
83 British Library, IOPP Mss Eur 379/2: 20–9.
84 Singer (1992).
85 Tachard (1999).
86 Garnier (2004: 110).

Image 16: Royal Siamese barges carrying the French Ambassador, the Chevalier du Chaumont, to the Court of King Narai at Ayutthaya. The account of the Embassy informs us that one of the boats forming part of this procession was set aside for the letter on its own. [*Source: Tachard, 1688*]

ceremony there are numerous exceptions. During Chaumont's Embassy to Siam, he was expected to raise up Louis XIV's letter high above his head on a gold tray for King Narai seated upon a platform above him, so that the King could receive it. However, feeling a slight to French royal dignity, Chaumont only lifted it halfway, forcing King Narai to partially lean over and take the royal letter from the tray. Luckily, the Siamese monarch was not offended by such actions;[87] however, the same cannot be said of Chinese Emperor Jiajing. He summarily dismissed British Ambassador Lord Amherst from China for refusing to prostrate himself before the Emperor in a *kou tou*. In a letter to George III Jiajing explained his reasons for the Embassy's expulsion and sent a specific injunction to send no more embassies to China.[88]

Potentially more serious was if a letter was overlooked or no reply was sent. In 1769 it was reported to the court of directors that Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II was disconcerted and uneasy 'at having received no answer from the King of England to his letters or acknowledgements of his presents; and the more so as he has been informed that the Nabob of Arcot, one of his subjects, has been honoured by our King with an answer to his letter accompanied by a complimentary present'. The importance of maintaining good relations with the Emperor was vital for the legitimacy of the Company's imperial authority; thus the chairman and deputy chairman approached the Secretary of State. The Royal Household launched a full investigation into the matter and hurriedly prepared letters and presents for

87 Ibid.: 195; Tachard (1999: 170–2).

88 British Library, IOR/G/12/197: 391–402.

despatch to the Emperor.[89] Finally, state bureaucracy could also put some serious stumbling blocks in the way of delivering a letter. On Robert Clive's return to England from Bengal in July 1767 the letter and gifts given to him by the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II for George III were held up in his luggage in customs. Clive was summoned to a royal audience a few days after his arrival, which necessitated him paying an official bride of £50 to release the gifts and letter. Such a large bribe being paid is itself proof of the important diplomatic role accorded to royal letters.[90]

Conclusion

Having discussed the history of the creation and exchange of royal letters between England and Asia, it can no longer be inferred that the Crown's involvement in Asian diplomacy was minimal. The quantity of surviving royal letters and related archival material generated by both Crown and Company officials demonstrates that the production and exchange of royal letters was continuous rather than sporadic. The bureaucracy involved in drafting outgoing and translating incoming royal letters was also highly complicated, with each letter's content being carefully considered. The production of decorated presentation copies was also time-consuming, requiring the highest levels of craftsmanship. Although scholars are correct in stating that diplomacy tended to be handled by mercantile or military officials on the spot, the ceremonies surrounding the delivery of royal letters to their intended recipients reveals a more nuanced picture. Royal letters were clearly symbolic representations of the crown, being treated as sovereigns in their own right and generally accorded with appropriate marks of etiquette, respect and dignity. The Crown continually worked in tandem with the East India Company with regards to royal letters, and such royal support was recognized by all parties to be a central component of English diplomacy throughout Asia. Proving this by describing the technical issues surrounding the creation and delivery of royal letters, their significance as a research resource for individuals interested in the study of diplomacy, communication, linguistics, art and culture has also been touched upon. It is hoped that future research on this important body of material will eventually contribute to further our understanding of early cross-cultural contact between England and Asia.

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[89] British Library, IOR/H/100: 475–82; IOR/H/101: 85–90, 133–42, 151–70, 283–6.

[90] Bence-Jones (1974: 244).

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